



10

**THE INTERPLAY OF GENDER, TRADITION, AND MODERNITY IN GITA MEHTA'S RIVER SUTRA, RAJ AND SNAKES AND LADDERS**

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**Abstract:**

*Literature has been significantly shaped by gender, tradition, and modernity, which have an impact on how stories are written, people are portrayed, and social standards are either questioned or upheld. Particularly when examining how literature depicts the changing roles of men and women, the conflict between traditional and modern ideals, and the eroding lines between what is deemed progressive and what is deemed conventional, these issues offer a rich backdrop for analysis. Similarly, A significant issue that has changed over time, reflecting societal shifts and impacting cultural standards, is the interaction of gender, tradition, and modernity in literature. These components influence the roles that characters perform, the way stories are delivered, and the messages that literature expresses. The ways in which literature addresses societal structures, identity, and transition are influenced by gender, tradition, and modernity.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, Interplay, Modernity, Society, Tradition, etc.*

Character identities and story structures are greatly influenced by gender in literature. Rigid gender norms are frequently shown in traditional works, where female characters are typically viewed as submissive or nurturing and masculine characters as authoritative and powerful. These positions serve to uphold existing social structures in addition to reflecting the values of their particular nations. Modern literature, on the other hand, frequently questions these established gender stereotypes by examining the flexibility and diversity of gender identity. Characters that defy social norms are frequently included in contemporary works, providing more complex representations of gender that take into account the evolving ideas of identity and power. Smith Jane says that,

In literature, gender roles are often depicted as rigid and binary, reinforcing societal expectations about masculinity and femininity. These roles can either be subverted or reinforced depending on the narrative's portrayal of characters' agency, behavior, and relationships. Literary works frequently interrogate the consequences of confining individuals to gender norms, often illustrating the struggle for identity in the face of societal pressures (Smith, 142).

The quotation emphasizes that literature often explores the tension between societal pressure to conform to gender roles and individual struggles for identity. Characters may be depicted as wrestling with these expectations, trying to navigate the limitations imposed on them by society's understanding of what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine." The portrayal of this struggle in

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literature reveals the consequences of confining people to strict gender norms, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals as they seek to define themselves outside of societal stereotypes.

In literature, tradition refers to the societal standards, cultural practices, and values that have been passed down through the generations and influence storytelling. A society's social structures and moral standards are frequently upheld by traditional narratives, which serve to reinforce the ideals that have been passed down through the ages. These works frequently reinforce hierarchical or patriarchal societies by highlighting the value of conformity. But tradition is being questioned and criticized as modernity advances. This conflict between tradition and change is frequently a major issue in literature, with works exploring the repercussions of upholding antiquated ideals in the face of novel concepts, advancements in technology, or social movements. In exploring the role of tradition and culture in literature, Robert E. Biedler asserts that, "literature is not only a mirror reflecting the values and customs of a culture but also a force that actively shapes the way individuals in that culture think, feel, and behave" (Biedler, 12). He argues that traditions and cultural values are often deeply embedded in literary works, and through the portrayal of these elements, literature serves as both a record of societal norms and a vehicle for challenging or reinforcing those norms. By engaging with a work of literature, readers are not only exposed to a particular cultural context but are invited to examine and question the assumptions underlying their own cultural practices.

On the other hand, modernity, which is characterized by changes in creative expression, social and political beliefs, and technological breakthroughs, signifies a departure from conventional norms. The rejection of traditional narrative frameworks, the adoption of novel literary forms, and the examination of subjects like individualism, existentialism, and alienation are all examples of modernism in literature. The internal conflicts of people are frequently the subject of contemporary writing, which also frequently emphasizes the fragmentation and alienation caused by the quick changes in society. This examination of contemporary living presents both fresh opportunities and difficulties for identity and society, as well as a rising disenchantment with long-standing customs.

Thus, gender, tradition, and modernity play interconnected roles in shaping literature, influencing character development, thematic exploration, and narrative techniques. The tension between these elements often mirrors the evolving nature of society, where established norms are questioned, traditional values are challenged, and new ways of understanding the world emerge. Literature acts as a powerful tool to examine the complexities of these social forces, allowing for deeper insights into the human experience and its continuous evolution. Indian drama's examination of gender, tradition, and modernization is a vibrant and multifaceted topic that captures the complexity of Indian society. These topics, which provide insights into the ways in which contemporary ideas and societal change interact with traditional gender norms, are interwoven into the plots of numerous plays.

Known for her work in literature, film, and the performing arts, Gita Mehta is a well-known Indian novelist, journalist, and filmmaker. Although her novels, including *Karma Cola*, *Raj*, and *The River Sutra*, are her most well-known works, she has also made significant contributions to Indian play and the country's larger literary and cultural landscape. Mehta is a significant player in the discussion of the development of Indian narratives, especially those conveyed through theatre, because of her work, which explores the nexus between traditional Indian culture and modernity. Gita Mehta was born in Delhi in 1943 and comes from a distinguished intellectual and political family. Her brother, Shashi Tharoor, is a renowned writer



and politician, and her father, Dr. K. L. Mehta, was a well-known bureaucrat. Mehta attended esteemed universities like the University of Delhi and the University of Oxford during her academic career, which provided a solid basis for her writing career. Her reputation in Indian culture, however, has been moulded by her work that spans several media, including journalism, film, and books. She delves into the underlying currents of Indian politics, religion, and society in her works, all of which have impacted Indian theatre and play today. In this regard, her best-known piece, *The River Sutra*, is especially pertinent. It examines the variety of human experience, spirituality, and the transformational impact of rivers in the lives of Indians through a sequence of interrelated stories set along the Narmada River. The river itself can be understood as a living character in the novel's poetic and evocative narrative, which has frequently been praised for its potential for conversion into dramatic performances that depict the spiritual journey of the Indian people.

In her literary works, *Raj*, *River Sutra*, and *Snakes and Ladders*, Gita Mehta explores complex themes surrounding gender, tradition, and modernity. Through her diverse characters and narratives, Mehta delves into the tension between cultural customs and the pressures of modernization, all while highlighting the experiences and roles of women within these shifting dynamics. This essay will examine how these themes manifest in Mehta's novels, using significant quotations and analyses from each work to illustrate her critique of societal norms and her exploration of the evolving identities in contemporary India.

### **Gender in Mehta's Works:**

Mehta's treatment of gender often centres around the limitations placed on women in both traditional and modern settings. In *Raj* (1997), the novel that traces the decline of the princely states in India, the protagonist, Uma, is caught between the rigid expectations of traditional gender roles and her personal desires for independence. Uma's journey reflects the tension women face in negotiating between the patriarchal expectations of their roles in society and their desire for personal agency. In one of the key passages of the novel, Uma reflects on her situation, "I had learned to be a woman of the times, but I was still a woman of my father's house" (Mehta, 145). This line encapsulates her internal conflict — torn between tradition and her newfound awareness of the modern world.

In *Snakes and Ladders* (2000), Mehta takes a more direct approach to gender as she explores the life of an Indian woman who works within the context of urban modernity. The novel's protagonist, Gita, struggles to balance her career and her role as a wife and mother. She faces the disillusionment of being trapped in the "double burden" of public and private life. Mehta's characterization of Gita highlights the tensions between familial obligations and the modern woman's pursuit of autonomy. Gita's reflections on her marriage reveal these complexities, "Marriage is a compromise. I have learned that. But sometimes it feels like a prison" (Mehta, 89). This quote illustrates the frustration and constraints that women face when caught between evolving social expectations and traditional roles.

Moreover, in *River Sutra* (1993), Mehta's exploration of gender is portrayed through the character of the Narmada River, a symbolic female entity, nurturing yet destructive. The river is representative of the tensions between the sacred feminine associated with traditional India and the loss of purity as the modern world encroaches on the natural world. The novel also features the character of a female singer, who uses her craft to navigate her position within a male-dominated society. As the protagonist reflects on the woman's struggle for recognition, he muses, "She sang



not just for love but for the world to acknowledge her talent in a world that insisted on knowing only her body” (Mehta, *River Sutra* 203). This poignant observation sheds light on the dual nature of female identity in a modernizing society — where women’s contributions are often overlooked or reduced to mere physical presence.

### **Tradition and Modernity: Clashing Worlds:**

In Mehta’s novels, tradition and modernity are in constant conflict, particularly in relation to gender and identity. This clash is vividly depicted in *Raj*, where Uma’s personal evolution and awakening to the modern world come into direct contrast with the rigid traditions that shape her family’s values. The crumbling royal family is symbolic of the decline of traditional India in the face of modernity. As Uma reflects on her family’s situation, she muses: “Tradition is like a stone... it will break you or bury you” (Mehta, 157). This illustrates the harsh impact of tradition on individuals, particularly women, who are often expected to conform to the roles assigned by long-established customs.

The novel also portrays the transition of India from British colonial rule to independence, symbolizing the shift from tradition to modernity. The Raj’s aristocracy, represented by Uma’s family, is a microcosm of the colonial period’s rigid hierarchical systems, which are gradually disintegrating as the world around them modernizes. The characters’ resistance to change, particularly in terms of gender roles, underscores Mehta’s exploration of how tradition can entrap individuals, especially women.

Similarly, *River Sutra* juxtaposes the traditions of rural India with the urban experiences of its characters. The setting along the Narmada River, with its religious and cultural significance, represents traditional India. In contrast, the urbanites who come to the river for spiritual quests are products of modernity, seeking to preserve the essence of their tradition amidst the pressures of their modern lives. The interaction between the river’s symbolic femininity and the modernizing forces in the characters’ lives underscores the tension between preserving tradition and embracing modernity. As the protagonist observes, “The river does not change. People change, and they forget that the river is unchanging” (Mehta, 161). This underscores how tradition, represented by the river, remains constant, while modernity leads people to forget or distort these foundational elements of culture.

In *Snakes and Ladders*, the modern world’s influence is felt in the corporate, fast-paced lifestyle of the urban setting. Gita’s journey, which includes navigating corporate politics and personal sacrifices, represents the changing role of women in contemporary society. Mehta critiques the overwhelming presence of global capitalism, which pressures individuals to constantly evolve and adapt, often at the cost of their traditional values. Gita’s reflections on her work life reveal her sense of alienation: “It is as if the rules of the game change every time you start playing” (Mehta, 112). This highlights the disorienting effect of modernization, particularly for women who have to carve a niche in both professional and personal spaces.

### **The Interplay of Tradition and Gender in a Modern Context:**

Gita Mehta’s works consistently highlight the ways in which tradition, modernity, and gender intersect to shape individual identities. The shift from a traditional to a modern world forces women to negotiate their roles, whether in the private domain of family life or in the public sphere of work and social mobility. In all three novels, the characters’ struggles and their interactions



with these forces underscore the importance of self-awareness and agency in a rapidly changing world.

The tension between tradition and modernity is particularly evident in the lives of Mehta's female characters. As Uma in *Raj* and Gita in *Snakes and Ladders* navigate societal pressures, they come to realize that neither tradition nor modernity provides complete answers or satisfaction. In *River Sutra*, the characters' engagement with spirituality offers a metaphor for their attempt to reconcile these conflicting forces, while the river's eternal flow provides a symbolic return to tradition. The river's journey reflects the characters' search for meaning in an increasingly complex world, where modernity often seems at odds with the simplicity and peace of traditional values.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, Gita Mehta's works provide a nuanced exploration of gender, tradition, and modernity. Through the characters in *Raj*, *River Sutra*, and *Snakes and Ladders*, Mehta explores the complexities of living in a world where traditional values clash with the forces of globalization and modernization. Her works illustrate how gender roles, while evolving, continue to be shaped by both the pull of tradition and the push of modernity, creating spaces for women to assert their agency in ways that challenge the boundaries of both. Through powerful characters and evocative storytelling, Mehta reflects on the difficulties, contradictions, and possibilities of navigating identity in a transforming world.

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